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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses various negative and positive Asian American stereotypes and explores how school practices and individual educators, consciously or unconsciously, may reinforce them. This has important negative social, political, and economic ramifications for Asian Americans. While Asian Americans are often characterized as the "model minority," many have serious psychological and emotional concerns that are not being addressed. High- and low-achieving Asian American students experience anxiety to uphold expectations of the model minority stereotype. Stereotyping has led to neglect in the development of student services and support for many undereducated, low-income Asian American students. The model minority stereotypes attribute educational and economic success to all Asian Americans, ignoring between- and within-group differences of assimilation, social, political, economic, and educational backgrounds. The model minority stereotype that Asian American students are "whiz kids" and immune from behavioral or psychological distresses prevents them from acknowledging academic and emotional problems and seeking help. It is essential to recognize that these students experience school, social, and familial stresses in order to uphold their "model minority" image. Asian American students report having more depressive symptoms and social problems than their White peers and experiencing racial and ethnic discrimination by their peers. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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By

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STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

In 1995, 268,000 of the 720,000 new immigrants that came to the United States were from Asia and the Pacific Islands. The Asian American population doubled between 1980 and 1990, and it will double again between 1990 and 2020. "Asian American" as a racial group represents 29 distinct ethnic categories (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993). Further, there is considerable social and economic variation between recent Asian immigrants and Asian American communities that have been in the United States for generations. The number of Asian American school age children and youth increased from 212,900 in 1980 to almost 1.3 million in 1990, creating a significant influx in many of the nation's public school systems, especially cities along the East and West coasts.

This digest discusses the various negative and positive Asian American stereotypes. It also explores how school practices and individual educators—consciously or unconsciously—may reinforce them. Doing so has important negative social, political, and economic ramifications for Asian Americans. Indeed, while Asian Americans are often characterized as the "model minority" (Lee, 1997, p. 442), many have serious psychological and emotional concerns which are not being addressed.

General Stereotypes

The various stereotypes assigned to Asian American students cause them emotional distress and create conflicts with their peers, both those of different races and those in their own racial group. Even more important, stereotyping limits students' opportunities and access to resources (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; S. Lee, 1996). Indeed, Fisher et al. (2000) found higher levels of distress from peer discrimination (being threatened, called racially insulting names, and excluded from activities) in Chinese and Korean students than in African Americans, Hispanics, and whites.

S. Lee (1996) reported that high- and low-achieving Asian-identified students experienced anxiety to uphold the expectations of the model minority stereotypes. The students who were unable to perform well academically felt depressed and were embarrassed to seek help. Moreover, dispelling the Asian American universal academic success myth, the Educational Testing Service (1997) found that twelfth grade students from six major ethnic groups (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, South Asian, and Southeast Asian) had significant variations in their educational backgrounds and achievement. ETS also demonstrated how stereotyping has led to the neglect of the development of student services and support for the many Asian American students who are undereducated and have low socioeconomic status.

Some of the educational stereotypes identify Asian Americans as "geniuses," "overachievers," "nerdy," "great in math or science," "competitive," "uninterested in fun," and "4.0 GPAs" (S. Lee, 1996). Some personality and behavior stereotypes assert that Asians are "submissive," "humble," "passive," "quiet," "compliant," "obedient," "stoic," "devious," "sneaky," "sly," "tend to hang out in groups," "stay with their own race," "condescend to other races," and are "racist," "not willing to mesh with American culture," "try to be like Americans," "want to be Caucasian," and "act F.O.B. [fresh off the boat]" (S. Lee, 1994; 1996; Yeh, 2001). The physical appearance and mannerism stereotypes include "short," "slanted eyes," "eyeglass wearing," "poor or non-English speaking," and "poor communicators" (S. Lee, 1996; Siu, 1996). Stereotypes related to the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans and their attitudes about money identify them as "stingy," "greedy," "rich," "poor," "grocery store owners," "dry cleaners," "restaurant owners," and "chefs" (S. Lee, 1996; Yin, 2000).

Model Minority Stereotypes

The model minority stereotypes attribute educational and economic success to *all* Asian Americans, with the danger that they ignore the between- and within-group differences of assimilation/acculturation, social, political, economic, and education backgrounds (Educational Testing Service, 1997; E. Lee, 1997; Siu, 1996; Yin, 2000). By focusing on exceptional "success stories" and generalizing to *all* Asian Americans, the model minority myth does not take into consideration the large number of Asian American students and their families who suffer from poverty and illiteracy (Educational Testing Service, 1997; Siu, 1996; Yin, 2000). For example, while only 5.6 percent of Japanese Americans have only an elementary education or less, 61 percent of the Hmong Americans fall into this category (Siu, 1996). Further, although the poverty rates for Japanese and Filipino Americans are 3.4 percent and 5.2 percent respectively, 24 percent of Vietnamese, 42 percent of Cambodians, and 62 percent of Hmong Americans live below the poverty line (Yin, 2000).

Within a group, Chinese American parents, for example, who are well-educated, English-speaking, wealthy professionals from Hong Kong will have different experiences and needs for their children in the United States than will a poorly-educated, non-English speaking, financially-troubled laborer from the countryside in China (Siu, 1996). In addition, Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong) students and their families—whose backgrounds may include war trauma, relocation experiences, family separation, and education disruptions—will have different psychological and academic needs from East Asian (Chinese, Filipino, Koreans, and Japanese) students and their families (Boehnlein, Leung, & Kinzie, 1997; E. Lee, 1996; S. Lee, 1994; 1996; Leung, Boehnlein, & Kinzie, 1997; Moore, Keopraseuth, Leung, & Chao, 1997; Siu, 1996).

Social and Psychological Concerns

The model minority stereotype that Asian American students are "whiz kids" (Brand, 1987) and immune from behavioral or psychological distresses prevents them from acknowl-

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edging academic and emotional problems and seeking help. S. Lee (1996) reports on a Cambodian student named Ming who was failing his classes but refused to seek help for his academic difficulties, believing that admitting his academic failure would cause his family to lose face (be ashamed). He was trying to live within the boundaries of the model minority stereotype, and as a result was perpetuating his academic problems, leaving him feeling isolated and depressed.

Whether the Asian American students are excelling academically or having problems, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge that they experience school, social, and familial stresses to uphold their "model minority" image (Chung, 1997; Fisher et. al, 2000; Huang, 1997; S. Lee, 1996; Siu, 1996). In fact, a study (Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000) found that although Asian American students did better academically and had fewer delinquent behaviors than Caucasian Americans, the Asian American youth reported more depressive symptoms, withdrawn behavior, and social problems. They also had poorer self-images and reported more dissatisfaction with their social support.

In addition, Asian American students have reported experiencing racial and ethnic discrimination by their peers (Fisher et al., 2000; Kohatsu et al., 2000; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Siu, 1996). Siu's (1996) study of literate Asian American students at risk demonstrates the social and psychological struggles resulting from the model minority stereotypes that foster discrimination and anti-Asian sentiments from their peers. The review found that a large proportion (63 percent) of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Korean elementary and secondary students reported that American students were "mean" to them. Being insulted or laughed at by classmates were cited as reasons for not liking school and lacking friends. In addition, commonly mentioned concerns of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cambodian refugee school age children were physical altercations with peers in school and in social interactions.

S. Lee (1996) discusses how Korean students distanced themselves from Southeast Asian students because they did not want to be associated and be perceived as "welfare sponges." It was, further, found by Siu that the proportion of suspensions for fighting was much higher for Filipino and Southeast Asian students than for all other ethnic groups, including whites, Latinos, and African Americans. These fights were attributed to cultural barriers and prejudice against Asians, especially Southeast Asians. Such racial tensions and a hostile school environment may divert students' focus from their studies to less productive or even destructive activities, and spur some Asian American youths to join gangs for their own protection and for a sense of belonging (Siu, 1996).

The increase in the number of Asian American students in schools highlights the importance of understanding how Asian American stereotypes are reinforced in the school context and contribute to a biased and limited perspective of Asian Americans that does not reflect their within group heterogeneity. In order to serve the social, psychological, and educational needs of Asian American students, teachers, counselors, and administrators must be able to address their own assumptions about this growing group, understand how those assumptions shape their interactions with the students, and effectively communicate that they care and want to help.

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